

Gumption, as well as mail, galloped over this old trail

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■ *First in a series*

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The Pony Express — the words spell adventure, action and romantic history.

The mail service was begun April 3, 1860, and lasted only 18 months, until Oct. 28, 1861, but what a sensational year and a half. Men — they were boys, actually, none over 18 and many only 14 years old — battled Indians, the weather and a twisting, dangerous trail.

The trail went from St. Joseph, Mo., to Sacramento, Calif., a distance of 1,966 miles. Mountain passes could have 15-foot snowdrifts in winter, and in summer, temperatures often reached 110 on the desert.

The U.S. House of Representatives has passed a bill to finance a study of the route. The study would determine whether the Pony Express road should be designated a national trail. The Senate is considering a similar proposal.



But where is the trail? How much of it can still be seen? Can people drive over the trail in a vehicle?

Recently, a friend, Steve Banks, and I set out to see if we could drive the Pony Express trail from Salt Lake City to Sacramento.

We were able to negotiate most of the trail, and except for some bad roads in Nevada, most cars can drive the route we took.

Our trip to Sacramento took three days and covered 760 miles, not counting almost 100 miles of wrong turns and back tracking, searching

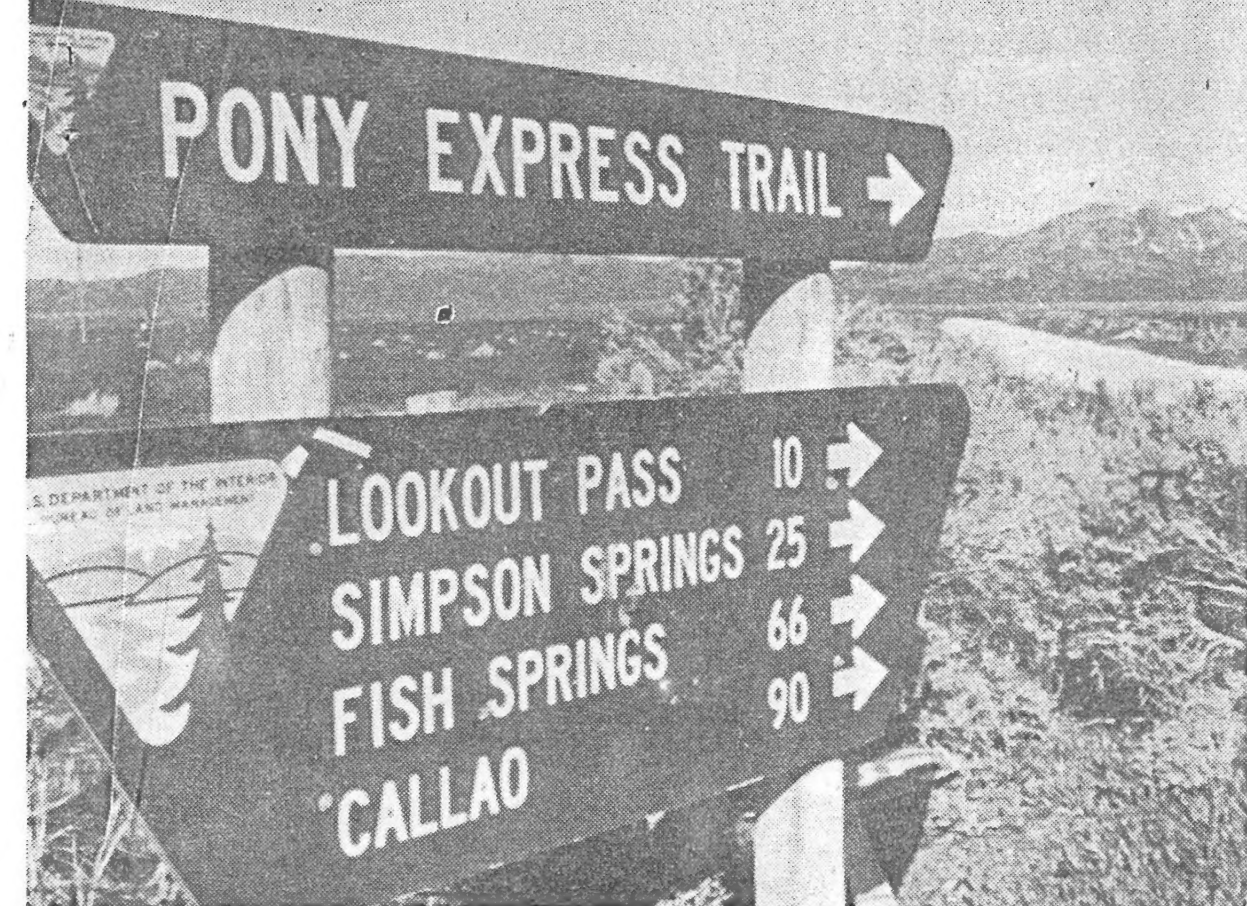
for the Pony Express trail in Nevada and California.

We drove a 1960 Chevrolet truck and pulled a 1962 Volkswagon dune buggy behind us. We had sleeping bags, extra clothes and food, soda pop and seven gallons of water.

In addition, we had five five-gallon cans of gasoline, two shovels, four spare tires (two for the truck and two for the dune buggy), assorted tools, a can of compressed air for flats, an ax, first-aid kit, two flashlights and a lantern, charcoal and wood for fires and stove fuel, eight quarts of oil, a 12-foot tow chain, a two-ton hydraulic jack and a large floor jack, and a tarpaulin to cover the bed of the truck and protect our gear.

Steve and I returned home in one piece, but the two vehicles suffered some damage. We lost the gas cap to the truck, battered continually by branches on some narrow stretches of road in Nevada, and had two flat tires on the truck.

The dune buggy was damaged
See EXPRESS on B-4



PHOTOGRAPHY/ BRUCE HILLS

Most points the way to the trail, which is far from paved roads and takes the intrepid traveler on a tour of dramatic, diverse, history-tinged scenery.

Continued from B-1

most. The left headlight was broken, the tow bar was bent, the back plastic window was broken and lost, the front window broken in several places, the body cracked and split in half a dozen places and the gas tank smashed in and cracked. All this damage occurred on the Pony Express trail in eastern Nevada.

Many times we were glad we had the dune buggy behind us. We used it to push and pull the truck out of bad spots in the road in eastern Nevada and used it alone nearly a dozen times to reconnoiter the trails ahead of us trying to find the Pony Express route.

The rocks on the road through Utah could cause blowouts if you're driving too fast, but the biggest problem in negotiating the Pony Express trail through Utah is the lack of gas stations.

You won't find one until you get to

Ibapah near the Utah-Nevada border, so you should fill up your tank before you start west. Taking along some extra gas cans could save the day.

In addition, drive a trip-worthy vehicle because there is no place to get parts or repairs on the Pony Express trail.

West of Fairfield, each Pony Express station is about eight to 14 miles from the next. The Pony Express riders would change horses at each station and then ride on, carrying the mail in four leather containers attached to a leather apron, called a mochila, which was placed over the saddle.

When a rider came to a station, he jumped off his horse, removed the mochila, put it on a fresh horse and rode off. A rider might cover 75 to 125 miles before stopping to rest.

At its peak, the route from St. Joseph to Sacramento was made up of 190 stations, about 420 horses and 80 riders. Mail could be moved 250 miles in 24 hours. Under usual conditions, the horses would run about seven or

eight mph and the average time over the entire route was 10 days.

The fastest ride over the entire route was a bit more than 7½ days when riders carried President Lincoln's inaugural message. That means the horses averaged 10 miles an hour.

Along the entire route from Salt Lake City to Sacramento, the scenery is a spectacle of changing sights and colors. It is not a well-traveled road. It is a long way from the freeway and, for much of the trip, far even from two-lane blacktop roads.

You marvel at the country and its roughness. You drive for miles over rocks and bumps and deep ruts cut by streams. At times you are actually driving in stream beds. You suspect you are lost and on a ranch trail or long-unused logging path — then you see a stone marker or a wooden sign that says "Pony Express Trail," and you wonder all the more that such a route can really exist.

Next: Salt Lake City to the Utah-Nevada border.